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ABSTRACT

Improvisation can show teachers ways to use the senses to make ideas, emotions, or any academic lesson stick with a child. By using improvisational techniques, the teacher asks the student to play--to be active and to discover. For example, there are games to help the child to concentrate, verbalize, touch and make contact with other children, and show their understanding of abstract ideas. Games to help children get accustomed to improvisational teaching include the mirror game, tug-of-war, and demonstrating through physical action places, characters, and events. Suggestions for getting started include asking children what they might like to improvise, and participating in improvisational games. Teachers might present plots from children's literature or fables for improvisation, or a newspaper or magazine article. Teaching techniques that will help while conducting improvisation include teaching in role, asking good questions, and encouraging students to become involved in the search for understanding. Improvisation guarantees to encourage students to take risks and to become individuals, rather than relying completely upon the teacher. It can also be used for academic work in other classes as well, to show the importance of listening and to create energy and excitement for the classroom. (HTH)

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Bob Yowell

IMPROVISATIONAL DRAMA IN THE CLASSROOM (K-5)

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What is Improvisation:

1. To compose or simultaneously compose and perform, sing, etc. on the spur of the moment, and without any preparation extemporize.
2. To make, provide, or do with the tools and materials at hand, usually to fill an unforeseen, immediate need: as in improvised a bed out of leaves.
3. Improvisatore: A performer who improvises poems and songs.

The good actor is not merely concerned with the memorization of his lines, and in being in the right place on stage at the right time. The actor is concerned with understanding and communicating to an audience the correct, or at least the most meaningful, emotional and intellectual state of the character he/she is portraying at any given moment. There are several ways in which this is accomplished. One popular way is to employ techniques that will help an actor physically transform himself into another character. Such techniques include wearing the correct costume and using makeup to alter his own face to that of his character. He might assume a unique walk that is characteristic of a character. An accent or change in his voice to depict a character, might be another of the many techniques that an actor might employ. Actors who rely heavily on these "outer" tools are called technique actors.

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A method actor is someone who is more interested in getting inside the emotional state of the character he is playing. This type of actor will also have technique, but the method actor is geared to "becoming" the character in a more intense way than by merely putting on a costume and allowing that outer manifestation to do all the work of helping the audience to believe that the actor is the character. Method acting is a concept that we Americans associate with the Actor's Studio started by Lee Strasberg, who got many of his ideas from the great Russian actor/director, Constaine Stanislavski. A method actor might try to find someone who is very much like the character he is to play, and he/she will attempt to discover and feel the pain and joy of that human, so that the actor is able to communicate it on stage. A method actor might read everything in sight to know the character. For example, if an actor were to portray the character "Ghandi" it would be helpful to know the man so that when it comes time to make acting choices, the actor is totally familiar with the person he is to portray.

I'm not here to tell you which theory of acting is good or bad or better or worse. (Actually most good actors I know employ techniques from both styles.) One acting tool that both theories employ is improvisation.

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For example, I was recently reading about a director who was working on a movie about prison life. It was to be a realistic movie, real characters, real situations, hence, real human drama. During the early rehearsals, the actors were not given their scripts to learn or memorize. Instead, they "improvised" scenes to attempt to get the inner feeling of what it might be like to be a prisoner. (I might mention here that when Stanislavski was doing a drama about living in the slums - Gorky's Lower Depths, he had all of his actors live in the slums for three months so that they could get the inner essence of slum life.) These actors improvised, trying to catch a quick smoke before the bell rang to move them to another part of the prison. They improvised talking in whispers. They improvised moving in a very confined space that is cell-like. They traveled to prison to see and feel what it must be like to be in confinement. All of this was done to get at the essence of being a prisoner. After several weeks of this type of improvisational work, they were given their scripts about prison life. The script did not have scenes where a prisoner takes a quick smoke, but the kind of physical activity that can be improvised and must be employed if a good theatre piece is to be real. We, the audience, are interested in seeing a three dimensional, living human being in conflict. We are not interested in seeing an actor who has merely memorized his lines. We want to share with him his pain.

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Now what does the art of acting have to do with being a teacher, especially a teacher of young children. This might be a particularly good question in view of the mood of the country, which is demanding that children get the basics. Most would agree that theatre is a cultural frill, and it is not related to teaching.

In many ways teachers, just like all human beings, are actors. We are constantly "in role" either with the children we teach or with our peers. And what do we do when we are in roles (the role of teacher, wife, father, daughter-in-law), we improvise. We make up things as we go along, we experiment.

Great teachers have taught us for centuries that "we learn by doing." A student is someone who learns by being physical. We learn through our senses. We do not learn merely through our heads, and yet so much of education is fed to children only through their heads. What improvisation can do for teachers is to show them ways in which they can use the senses to make ideas, emotions or any academic lesson stick with the child.

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John Dewey explained it this way. If you drive down the road in your car, and it suddenly breaks down, the driver must become "active" to solve the problem. He must get out of his car, look under the hood, and attempt to find the problem. He cannot merely sit, and think about the problems, and hope it will go away. Maybe in some future STAR WARS adventure this will happen, but not today. Further, part of his thinking process might be that he thinks that he will have to call in an expert to help solve the problem. At any rate, it is a problem that must be solved with acting and thinking. Let's look at this situation from another perspective. If we assume we learn from being active, let's take a look at the world of the child. Recess might be one of the best times of the school day for the child because he "plays." As an adult, we often laugh about this because the joke is that playing is not cognitive or intellectual, but learning psychologists have discovered that more learning takes place in "playing" than in those circumstances whereby children and adults merely sit and attempt to absorb intellectual ideas. In a nutshell, the theory is that we learn by "doing". We play to learn.

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Now, how does this relate to using improvisation to do a better job of teaching. It's simple, by using improvisational techniques, the teacher asks the student to play, that is, to be active and to discover. The theatre game becomes a tool to unleash the potential of the student. In the classroom, we often hear teachers saying to students, "study harder, do your homework." With many children, simply studying hard is asking a child to learn in a vacuum. The child can memorize, but will he truly understand the material from both an affective and cognitive level?

Improvisational technique encourages a child to be creative. The child must look for alternative ways to make discoveries. The child must be free of his fear of failure. He must be in an environment that is exciting and unleases his natural curiosity. Now let's look at what improvisational teaching might do for the child:

1. If you assume, with me, that play is the basis for learning, then:
   a. Improv is an opportunity to play.
   b. Children learn by doing.
   c. Improv is action centered activity that has as its base goal, problem solving.
   d. It's a chance to work with another human being.
   e. It's an activity that has a beginning, middle and an end.
2. Approval/disapproval in Improvisational Drama
   In order to be spontaneous, people need freedom to create.

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a. In improvisational teaching, there is no right or wrong answer. Children are free to discover without fear from authority figures.

3. Improvisational teaching is a group process
   a. An opportunity to solve problems within a group.
   b. The drama creates an ensemble while maintaining individuality.
4. Improvisational teaching allows the student to carry what he learns in the drama into his daily life and the child also learns what aspects of his daily life can be carried into the drama.
5. Physicalization:
   Through improvisation, students learn to place emotions into physical actions.

How does a teacher begin to use Improvisational Teaching?

First, let me demonstrate some improvisational games that are intended as warm-ups. They help children get into the mood of playing, but as you can see, there is a certain structure to this kind of playing. Further, these games also help the student to develop techniques that are essential to using drama as a learning medium.

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For example, there are games to help the child concentrate, to verbalize, to touch and make contact with other children, to show their understanding of abstract ideas. In fact, the expression "show me, don't tell me" is one of the most basic concepts of good acting. Show me how you know is what all good teachers are looking for their students to be able to do.

Games to help children get accustom to improvisational teaching

1. Mirror Game - One child is the leader. The other child must imitate the movement of another. Often it is a simple hand movement.
   (Side coaching: Such cues might include--concentrate on doing exactly as your partner. Do the same things that he does with his fingers. This exercise builds concentration. It is something that every child can do.
2. Tug of War - There are many variations of this game. Children can be divided into both large and small groups depending on the size of the group you are working. A simple tug of war enacted without the rope, of course.
   (Side coaching: Use your hands properly. How big (round) would the rope be? Is it heavy? How would your feet be placed. When the tug of war begins: show us how hard you're pulling--use your back--let me see your muscles strain in your neck.

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3. Where - Again, there are many variations on this game--Viola Spolin in her book, Improvisation for the Theatre gives a detailed account of how to play this game. Basically, the child is asked to come into an area, and through some type of physical action, we (his/her audience) will be able to guess where he is.
(Side coaching: As you can tell, side coaching is a vital aspect of teaching. Can you use your hands to show us where you are? Is there anything in the room that you can use (theatre people call this a prop) to show us where you are? A toothbrush? The television set? Don't forget, as a teacher, we must encourage all children to realize that there is no way to fail at this game.

4. Who - Who are you? The child must show us, not tell us who he is. What physical action can the child do to show us who he is?
(Side coaching: You're flying an airplane, you're a pilot, you're driving a car very fast--are you a race car driver? Etc.

5. What - What is happening? Here the child is to demonstrate an activity that will help him to use his body to "share" what he is trying to communicate.

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These warm-ups are just five examples of many, many that could be given. You probably already do some form of warm-up in your class, and there is no reason why you can't invent warm-ups that work for you. Improvisation is a highly individual teaching technique.

Now let's do the Improvisation!

What should you improvise? Getting started is always difficult, but consider the following:

1. Can you ask the children what they would like to improvise?
   a. Consider all suggestions and your experience as a teacher will help you to weed out what you know will work, and what will cause disruption in a classroom.
   b. Ask the children what parts they will play.
   c. If there is a conflict of who wants to play, what part, maybe more than one child can play the same part--e.g., two or three pilots verses one.
   d. You might want to participate and play a role.
   e. Your main job will be to side coach--to keep the drama going.

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This form of drama is the most rewarding, however, it can be the most difficult. If the children are not ready to "make-up" their own improv, maybe it is necessary to play more warm-up games. On the other hand, you, as the teacher, can invent basic plots to improvise. For example:

a. You could present to the class a plot outline of a story that you know that they will be reading in their next lesson.

b. You could present a plot outline from children's literature.

c. You could present a plot outline from a fable or a classic myth.

d. You could present a newspaper or a magazine article (appropriate to their developmental level).

As you present improvs for the class to do, don't forget they need only be outlines. For example, if your students begins to change the plot outline, in most situations, that's ok.

In looking for material to improvise, you have an opportunity to pick and choose ideas and stories that will do the kind of teaching that you feel is necessary. For example, if your class is weak in writing, this basic skill can be part of the improv. In a similiar manner, if your class is not interested in reading, use the improv to create the excitement for reading.

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In teaching, we all have specific subject matter that must be taught, however, any good classroom teacher knows that her group needs to be taught many, many things and ideas that are not in textbooks. For example, I once heard a teacher say--my third grade class has no sense of wonder. So here is a chance to pick material for an improv that has as its theme "magic." Somehow that teacher wanted to get her third graders moving on the magic of being alive. What better way than through improvisational drama.

Another teacher explained that her class has trouble getting along with each other. Improvisational drama is an excellent way to create a situation in which children must cooperate with each other in order to achieve a goal. For example, a plane crash in the desert. Some passengers are injured--we need fire, we need food, we need to send someone out for help. What we need in the drama is children working together in role, to help one another, we need to teach co-operation.

Impro techniques are good teaching techniques

While you conduct improvisational drama in the classroom, let's look at a few teaching techniques that will help the drama, and also are very valid tools for good teaching.

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1. Teaching in role:

In helping the drama to move forward, you the teacher, can assume a role within the drama. This will take you away from being the teacher (the authority figure), to being a character in the drama. Some rules about being in role are:

a. Stay in role only long enough to give the drama energy to go on its own.

b. Give little verbal information--try to give non-verbal information--help the students to do it themselves.

c. Use the authority of the role to help students function--not to be their authority (teacher) figure.

d. Use role (become a reporter or a messenger) to encourage students to explain what they are about.

e. Bring in another person, in role, to serve as a catalyst for creating an improv. For example, bring into class someone pretending to be a bag lady.

2. Asking good questions:

Good teaching is often asking the right questions. That is certainly the Socratic method. During an improv, questions can be asked:

a. Questions that seek information:

1. What shall we do a play about?
2. What must you take with you?
3. How many horses do we need?

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b. Questions that supply information:

1. How many gallons of water should we take on the journey?
2. Do we need a lookout?
3. You're actually going to ride that tall horse?

c. A third group of questions, broad branching questions, call for a group decision between alternative couses of action:

1. Shall we be in the past, present or future?
2. Are we in trouble because we are in danger or hungry?
3. Would you like to make more plans or trust me to start the drama?

d. Questions to control the class:

1. How are we going to make ourselves look like soldiers?
2. Are we too tired to start on the hunt today?
3. Do you want to stop this drama now or go on with it?

3. Code Cracking--Use the techniques of drama to lead back to the very code of learning.

The reason for using use drama in classroom learning is to take the essence of drama, which is the mystery of not knowing, and using that fact, to encourage children to become involved in the search for understanding, and to realize that this search for "truth" can become a joyous process.

For example, rather than hand a child a difficult book to read, a teacher might encourage a drama (improv) that is based on the theme of the book. The drama could be illustrated in contemporary terms or imaginary ones that will grab the magic of the moment. Once the child is hooked on the idea, through play, he can then be introduced to the literature. In this way, the "code is cracked."

Don't forget, in drama, all kinds of questions will present themselves and children within the drama can be encouraged to go to dictionaries, to the library or wherever to find the necessary solutions.

We use drama to motivate children to discover answers. Think of drama in the classroom as a fire engine heading full speed down the highway, siren screaming, lights flashing. Where is it going? What's the problem? Who is in trouble? Who will live/die? Is something happening to someone I know and love? All of these questions that we think of as a fire engine passes — is essentially the essence of theatre. Drama in the classroom can create magic.

<u>What guarantees are there for improvisational drama?</u>

First, you the teacher, must decide why you are teaching--guarantees will grow from what you hope to achieve. However, here are a few general guarantees:

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1. Students are encouraged to take risks.
2. To encourage students to become individuals--not totally reliant upon the teacher.
3. To encourage individual projects.
4. To bring the real life of the child into the classroom.

Drama is done not just for drama, but for academic work in other classes as well:

1. To show the importance of listening.
2. To allow the teacher to show what truths there are.
3. To create energy and excitement for the classroom.

Other guarantees:

1. To encourage students to develop ideas from general to specifics.
2. To make abstract concepts more concrete.
3. To crack the curriculum code. (as explained above)
4. To clarify values.
5. To develop vocabulary.
6. To work with others.
7. To stick with something they might not like.
8. To reflect on personal experience/to examine experiences.

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